

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 434

EA 020 004

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TITLE More Than Rumors. Understanding the Organizational Grapevine.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administration; *Communication Problems; *Diffusion (Communication); *Informal Organization; *Information Networks; *Organizational Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Grapevines (Communication)

ABSTRACT

Because the grapevine can precipitate managerial nightmares (employee resentment, distorted messages, instant diffusion of incendiary rumors), managers are well-advised to study this informal communications network and diffuse its organizational impact. This paper discusses the development, accuracy, resilience, and management of the grapevine. Since grapevines do not develop by managerial design, they ignore formal communication channels and are affected by building and office layout and by common hobbies and activities, not to mention lunch schedules, family ties, social relationships, common home towns, and committee work. Messages travel along the grapevine at an alarmingly rapid pace, whether information is correct or distorted. The grapevine is extremely resilient and is unlikely to be eliminated or formalized by executive fiat. For this reason, administrators must learn to manage the informal network by (1) using it; (2) being as candid as possible; (3) effectively screening employees; and (4) admitting mistakes quickly. Failure to understand and manage the grapevine properly will cause frustrating management problems. (MLH)

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MORE THAN RUMORS

UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIZATIONAL GRAPEVINE

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MORE THAN RUMORS

Understanding the Organizational Grapevine

ABSTRACT: THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES THE NATURE AND IMPACT OF THE INTERNAL ORGANIZATIONAL GRAPEVINE. A CASE IS PRESENTED TO ILLUSTRATE THE PROBLEM, AND THE ARTICLE CONTINUES WITH A DESCRIPTION OF THE DEVELOPMENT; ACCURACY; RESILIENCE; AND MANAGEMENT OF THIS INFORMAL COMMUNICATION NETWORK.

Anderson, Dixon and O'Rourke

At four o'clock on a Thursday afternoon David Anderson, a middle manager, was called into Vice President Dixon's office. The meeting was brief. Dixon told Anderson that the company could no longer endure the incompetence of one, Jimmy O'Rourke. O'Rourke was going to have to be let go and Dixon wanted Anderson to take care of informing O'Rourke by the end of the week.

Anderson wasn't happy with this assignment, but not because he disagreed with Dixon. O'Rourke was indeed a liability, yet the prospect of firing him was particularly unpleasant.

Jimmy O'Rourke and David Anderson were close friends who four years ago had started working for the company together. Last year there had been a promotion review. Anderson had been promoted to a middle management position and O'Rourke had not. With the promotion, Anderson became, in effect, O'Rourke's boss. The promotion in and of itself had not posed a problem. However, as O'Rourke's boss, Anderson noticed that O'Rourke was simply not an efficient employee. His work was sloppy and often had to be redone by

someone else. O'Rourke tried hard enough, but even with his foot to the floor he was inept and sometimes clumsy. Two months earlier he'd made a colossal mistake that cost the company a lot of money and may have even tarnished the company reputation. It made sense to let O'Rourke go.

Nevertheless, Anderson's situation was extremely sensitive. Not only were O'Rourke and he racquetball buddies, but during a rough personal time for Anderson, O'Rourke had "been there" for Anderson in a way that true friends are. Firing O'Rourke was one of those correct corporate moves that was personally agonizing.

Anderson spent all Thursday night anguishing over how to inform O'Rourke. He worked on the wording of his message until he had practically memorized what he would say.

On Friday, Anderson asked O'Rourke to come over to his office cubicle. O'Rourke ambled over, sat down, and then, Anderson began a well rehearsed speech.

"Jimmy, we've been friends for a while and I've got to do something I don't want to do."

"Yeah, I know," interrupted O'Rourke. "You're letting me go. I know. I know already."

" 'We've been friends for a long time.' " O'Rourke mimicked. "Don't be so disgustingly dramatic. We're real buddies, right. On Wednesday, Sam over in Production, told me you and your new fat cat friends were getting rid of me. I knew that my 'good buddy' was firing me on Wednesday, pal."

"It was just swell to hear that news from Sam Gluckman and not from you. It was just terrific to hear through the grapevine. Thanks, pal."

"Jimmy," Anderson stammered, "You don't understand, I just found out about this yesterday. I swear to God."

"Right. You guys are all the same. You're all like Nixon, get a little power and you'd stab your mother in the back. Just let me know the basics-- severance pay, and that. Don't disgust me with your, how much you love me, garbage."

"There's been some miscommunication, Jimmy."

"Right."

Those who study communication in organizations are concerned, among other things, with the creation and maintenance of information networks. One of the most important of these networks is the informal network or grapevine. The Anderson, Dixon, O'Rourke case is illustrative of one of the frustrating problems caused by the grapevine.

Managers are all too familiar with situations like O'Rourke's. These scenarios and other grapevine related problems can be nightmares for management. The grapevine can: make employees resentful; embarrass managers; distort messages; facilitate the "instant" diffusion of incendiary rumors; and, in general, militate against effective managerial decision making.

Because of the potential impact of the grapevine, it's important to clearly study the nature of this informal network to understand how it is likely to affect the modern organization. This article will discuss, the development; accuracy; resilience; and management of this important information conduit.

Development of Informal Networks

The informal networks are those channels which carry information on routes that are not prescribed by the organization. By definition, therefore, the grapevine does not develop by managerial design. While prescient managers might attempt to engineer its development, the informal networks usually generate on the basis of factors which are only peripherally related to corporate policy.

The nature of the grapevine will be affected, for example, by the physical layout of the buildings and offices within the buildings. If production and advertising share a common lounge area and rest room facility, it's likely that an informal network will develop among those people who populate the departments of production and advertising.

Common hobbies and activities play a large part in the development of the grapevine. If seven employees from different departments jog together each noon hour, information is likely to be passed along in the course of the run. The friendships that develop because of the common activity will result in social gatherings outside of the

organization during which information about the organization will be passed along as well. If Smith, in production, wants to find out about a policy in engineering, Smith may not call the engineering manager as prescribed on the formal network, but contact Jones, his jogging buddy.

It's not difficult to enumerate the factors which contribute to the growth of this important network. Lunch schedules, family ties, social relationships, and common home towns can affect the growth of the network. Even the formal network can affect the growth of the informal network. If you participate on a committee and in the course of your conference sessions become chummy with a person who previously had been a stranger, that budding friendship creates a part of the informal network.

Traffic, Speed, and Accuracy.

Many messages travel along the grapevine and do so at an extremely rapid pace. Information moves much more quickly on the grapevine than it does on the formal network.

The existence of the grapevine and its innate speed can pose some serious organizational problems. Rumors spread quickly and inaccurate incendiary news can move throughout a large organization in hours. Incorrect information is tough to stall once it begins to travel on the informal networks. As the British politician James Gallagher once said, "A lie can be halfway around the world before the truth has its boots on."

Although the grapevine can and does distort information, the grapevine can be and often is a rapid conveyor of accurate information as well. Often this accurate grapevine information reaches its destination before the chugging formal network can relay the message. The obvious result is employee anger and organizational embarrassment. Marvin Gaye is not the only person who lamented the fact that "he heard it through the grapevine." Managers are occasionally placed in positions where they have to deny the accuracy of information employees have received via the grapevine, until such time as the formal networks, dawdling along at a relatively glacier like pace, can officially inform the receiver of the information. Because of the swiftness of the informal network, the relatively slow formal network, and the occasional denials issued until the formal network catches up with the grapevine, the credibility of the formal network and those who operate it can be damaged.

Resilience

It's important to remember that the grapevine is not only fast and often accurate, but that it exists willy-nilly. No amount of plumbings units or directives from on high, or threats from Senators and White House staff will stop the informal network from operating. As long as there are cocktail parties; racquetball courts; lunchroom cafeterias; water coolers; bathrooms; coffee machines; two

chairs in an office; and sexual energy;-(and one can safely assume that most of the above will not be going out of style shortly)-there will be a phenomenon called informal networks. Therefore, one must try to manage the informal network and not attempt to eliminate it. The latter is only an exercise in frustration.

Management

Managing the informal network is difficult. The tendency is to want to eliminate the grapevine because the grapevine is so troublesome. Its very existence makes it difficult for employers to manage information diffusion, and therefore, there's a desire to get rid of it. There often are attempts to formalize all communication travel to "eliminate the need" for the informal network. This attempt can euphemistically be labeled, myopic, but realistically should be dubbed, foolish. I emphasize that one must resist the temptation to uproot the grapevine. It won't work, or won't work for long.

Although the grapevine, and the problems endemic to the grapevine are realities, there are ways to deal with it. The most intelligent way is to adopt a proactive communication policy which will decrease the problems that an unwieldy grapevine can cause. The following four suggestions if implemented will be helpful for grapevine management.

Use the informal network for you. The informal networks do work. Utilize them. The suggestion here is not to start wild rumors, but to complement the usage of the formal networks with the informal network, when appropriate. In order to use the informal network, management has got to analyze the organizational grapevine and discover its routes. Various "communication audits" can be helpful in diagramming the company informal networks.

Be candid about information that management can be candid about. An organization which has a reputation for honesty makes it easy on itself. The informal network will still operate and rumors will still spread, but disclaimors can help to squelch the spread of inaccurate information if those disclaimors are believed. Of course, there are items that can not become public information. There's nothing wrong in explaining that certain pieces of information will be diffused when the time is right for that information to be diffused. Organizations that are credible are more likely to have patient employees who will believe that information will be forthcoming at appropriate times.

Screen employees effectively The informal network will exist regardless of personnel. However, if there is a garrulous employee in an important position, the grapevine will become unnecessarily and destructively active.

I remember one particular administrator, Haze, in a large organization who was notorious for his loquacity and desire to spread titillating information. He would approach

relative strangers, look both ways as if he was concerned about lurking KGB agents, and whisper,

"Just between you, me, and the wall pole, Charlie Harris will be the next plant manager. This is confidential stuff now so — keep this under your hat, you hear."

The irony in this situation was that the information that Haze often passed along, was common knowledge, yet Haze wanted to appear to be the one in a position to relay juicy tidbits.

Admit Mistakes Quickly. Former President Richard Nixon's eventual demise was the result of his inability to admit mistakes. When you err, don't hide it. The only people who should deny mistakes are those who err habitually. Good people will make mistakes occasionally, and admitting them is a positive and not a negative trait.

The informal network is going to exist. The nature of the information that travels on the grapevine does not necessarily have to be counterproductive. There will be problems, but the above suggestions can diminish the problems that the grapevine may cause.

Summary

Organizations need to recognize the nature of communication networks in order to facilitate the flow of information within the organization.

It is particularly important to understand the nuances of the informal network because so much information travels along these non prescribed channels. Administrators who do not understand and manage the grapevine effectively are likely to be burdened with frustrating management problems.